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ABSTRACT

The sample for this 2-year study of student absenteeism consisted of 6 comprehensive high schools, 3 from each of 2 urban school districts with 1,000 to 1,600 students and 60 to 70 full-time teachers. Highlights of the first-year findings summarized in this journal are based on the responses of nearly 8,000 students and 350 teachers. Attendance records are neither accurate nor consistent from school to school. Almost a third of the students missed an average of at least one class per day; nearly all students missed some of their classes two to three times more often than other classes. Students named social sciences, English, and math as subjects they cut the most. Penalties seemed to be a poor deterrent; having to make up classwork was the most powerful deterrent. Compared to low-absence students, high-absence students accounted for 84 percent of all grade point averages below 1.5; and 85 percent said they would be satisfied with a C or D grade, compared to 50 percent of the students with fewer absences who said the same. Absences by students in classes they failed were double the overall school rate; they were triple the school rate for those students who failed more than one class. To control chronic absenteeism and prevent more students from dropping out, administrators should improve school curriculum, instructional techniques, and attendance policies. (MLF)

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New Study Looks at High School Absenteeism

by John de Jung and Kenneth Duckworth

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Student absenteeism has been and continues to be one of the most serious, most intractable problems for secondary school administrators. In response to rising absenteeism, teachers, counselors, and administrators alike find themselves neglecting students who attend school regularly and instead devoting more time to chronic absentees. The frequently absent student is also a heavy loser. In fact, one former New Jersey Commissioner of Education commented:

> Frequent absences of pupils from regular classroom learning experiences disrupt the continuity of the instructional process. The benefit of regular classroom instruction is lost and cannot be entirely regained, even by extra after-school instruction. Consequently, many pupils who miss school frequently experience great difficulty in achieving the maximum benefits of schooling. Indeed, many pupils in these circumstances are able to achieve only mediocre success in their academic programs. (Wheatley et al. 1974)

Nationwide, high school students miss about 10 percent of their school days every year, a rate that may be at least twice as high in many larger metropolitan areas (Foster 1983). If the annual dropout rate of about 10 percent of the total high school population were also added in, the overall absence rate would be even higher. Worse, since absences are probably "underreported" because of student deviousness, careless reporting practices, varying definitions of absence, and administrative concern for "appearances" and school reimbursements, the real percentage of absences may actually be higher still (Meyer et al. 1971).

Not only are these absence rates disturbingly high, but the causes of absenteeism are also complex. Inadequate or inappropriate school curricula may lead to high absentee rates. Personal and social factors like student relationships with particular school administrators and teachers, family attitudes, peer pressures, social values, economic circumstances, age, and health may also cause high rates. Given such complexity and many districts' limited resources, schools often end up shepherding "strays" rather than corralling the whole flock. In fact, the more persistent "strays" are often herded out.

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The Study

During the last few decades, American schools experimented with numerous administrative policies

regarding student absenteeism. One continuing trend, for example, is to require class attendance as a condition for grades, course credit, or continued enrollment. However, we believe that creating such policies should involve a complete examination of student attendance using a data base that covers several school terms and that includes perspectives from teachers and students as well as from administrators. We incorporated these requisites into a two-year study initiated by the University of Oregon Center for Educational Policy and Management (CEPM) in December 1983. Here we summarize some highlights of our first-year findings as an interim report.

We believe that these findings will constitute one of the most complete current analyses of the complexities of absenteeism. We are looking at absentee rates; at differing definitions of absenteeism and procedures for keeping track of absences and their dramatic effects on absentee rates; at variations in absences by student, by teacher, and by subject; at the relationship between absences and grades; and at teacher and administrator concerns. We do not believe that such an extensive examination of these critical aspects of absenteeism can be found elsewhere. In spring 1986 we anticipate reporting on the consistency of these findings over two years and how attendance and attendance-related measures may change with school practices.

School Sample and Data Collection

Our sample consisted of six high schools, three from each of two urban school districts in the western United States—one district enrolling approximately 14,000 students in 10 high schools and another district in the same state with approximately 5,000 students in four high schools. All six schools were four-year comprehensive high schools with 1,000 to 1,600 students and 60 to 70 full-time teachers. The larger district had some schools serving low-income student populations, although none were like the embattled inner city schools with high proportions of ethnic minorities and devastating absenteeism that are so often described in popular media reports. The school with the most minority students had a 25 percent minority population of mostly Asian-American students. The black populations in these schools represented less than 10 percent of total enrollment.

Our data collection involved (a) extended interviews and subsequent questionnaires given to most key administrators; (b) district records of absences and end-of-term reports of courses taken, grades received, and classes missed; (c) a questionnaire administered to classroom teachers with followup interviews of some teachers; and (d) a questionnaire administered to all students. Our present findings are based on the responses of nearly 8,000 students and 350 teachers who participated in the first year of the study. We repeated this entire data collection process in the second year.

Problems in Measuring Absence

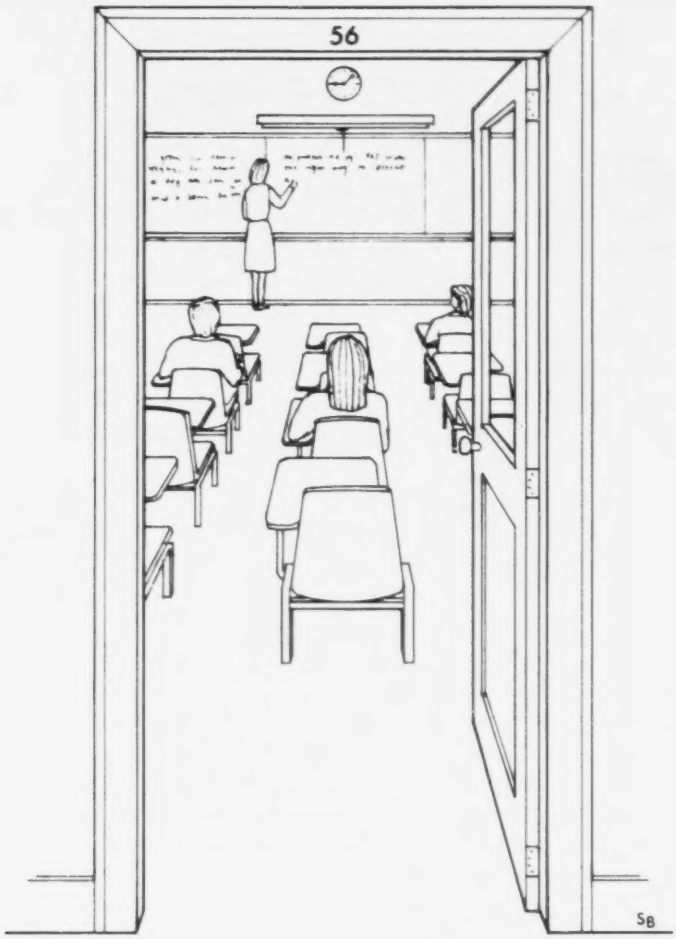
We discovered that school attendance records were not nearly as accurate as they should have been for several major reasons: no consistent procedure for recording absences in the classroom, errors made in entering teachers' absence reports into office records, varying definitions and guidelines for what constitutes full-day and half-day absences, and no official records of class absences. As a result, many student absences never become part of a school's attendance record. The true absence rates may well be much higher than official school or district records now indicate; absenteeism may be an even more serious problem than we thought.

Attendance-taking procedures vary from teacher to teacher. Some call out all names, while others scan their rooms for empty seats; some delegate attendance taking to a responsible student, while others may excuse a student from class for a prearranged absence and not record it. Clearly such variety may affect attendance counts, as may a teacher's diligence in recording attendance, a task that some find more important than do others. Still, almost all of the 350 teachers in our first-year sample said that they considered attendance important and were "concerned to be as accurate as possible in taking attendance," even if others were not.

True absence rates may well be much higher than official school or district records now indicate; absenteeism may be an even more serious problem than we thought.

Attendance records are also affected by frequent errors made when class absence reports are entered into school office records, often by unskilled student workers. Apparently, errors of omission, sometimes deliberate, are common. Student clerks at one school we studied simply stopped entering class lists into the attendance office's computer when their work hour was up—whether or not all class absences had been recorded. From conversations with student clerks and others, we learned that student office helpers are often pressured to omit certain

names from the daily absence reports. Thus, it is not surprising that teachers' records indicated three to five percent more class absences per day than did office records in schools where we were able to compare central office records and teacher classbooks.



An even more intractable error in reporting attendance is caused by the recording procedure itself—anyone not reported absent for the day is assumed to be present. Mistakenly reporting a student as absent is usually detected and corrected, especially if such an error leads to discipline. However, *not* recording a student's absence is an easier mistake to make, is probably more common, but is much less likely to be appealed. Such "errors of omission" work in everyone's favor: the school's attendance record looks better and no one is punished. In addition, no attendance is taken on "perfect attendance" days, such as examination or registration days; by default, all are present. Likewise, graduating seniors are rarely counted absent during their last few days of school.

The greatest error in underreporting attendance records results from the traditional method of reporting only full- and half-day attendance. This number, usually converted into a percentage of total student enrollment, easily translates into annual figures, which are usually described by schools and the press in terms of attendance percentages. This may work in elementary schools, where students remain in the same classroom for most of the day, but reporting only full- or half-day absences is grossly imprecise for high schools because it leaves out counts of class-period absences, which usually add up to a greater number of absences.

Apparently, each school's definition of full- and half-day absence varies according to administrative choice, sometimes at variance with state definitions, and is unrelated to the number of courses students take. Although some schools had seven- or eight-period days, the majority of students in all six schools were enrolled for six periods. Four of the six schools defined a full-day absence as four or more periods missed but split on whether two- or three-period absences constituted a half-day absence. Sometimes this depended on when a student had lunch. The fifth school, where 91 percent of the students had no more than six classes, recorded a half-day absence if three AM or three PM periods were missed and a full-day absence if five classes were missed. Not surprisingly, that school had the lowest average rate of reported full-day and half-day absences. The sixth school defined a full-day absence as six periods missed in the eight-period schedule and a half-day absence as two periods missed in either the AM or PM. Attendance clerks at all the schools said they took into account each student's class load when recording full- and half-day absences. However, since this would require having personal knowledge of all students'

schedules and making exceptions to school rules, they also agreed that they were not always able to keep track.

Many of the problems just described could be avoided by measuring absences by class-period rather than by a full day or half day. We developed such a measure of student absence from the total number of the absences reported on each student's end-of-term report card. In effect, these entries, based on teachers' records, are the schools' official statement on student absences. The sum of these absences is the number of periods for which each student was recorded absent. Dividing this sum by the number of classes taken yields a student's average number of class absences. Dividing this average number of class absences by the number of class days (or days on which attendance was taken) yields the student's rate of absence for that term. Thus, if a student had six classes during a 60-day term and a total of 48 absences in those six classes, that student's average class absence is eight periods, or an attendance rate of 86.7 percent. A student with that attendance rate could have had eight full-day absences, but it is more likely that there were only a few full-day absences, along with several classes missed four or five times and one or two classes missed twice as often. If so, school office records might list that student's absences as as low as two days or 96.7 percent attendance when only full-day plus half-day recorded absences are counted.

Absence: How Much?

As we had anticipated, end-of-term class absence rates were much higher than were full- or half-day absence rates in some schools. In fact, the average full-day plus half-day absence rate for the six schools was 7.5 percent, compared to a rate of 12.5 percent for class absences. These differences became even more striking for students with very low and very high numbers of absences. Nearly 30 percent of the students had no recorded *half-day* absences, and over 25 percent had no recorded *full-day* absences. Yet only one-half of one percent were found to have no *class* absences, and only 10 percent had an average of one absence per class or less. Conversely, only 5 percent of the students were recorded absent more than ten full days, but 14 percent averaged more than ten absences per class. Evidently, many students who repeatedly cut classes slip under their schools' full-day absence rule.

The most distressing fact about student absences is the volume; nearly every day in each of our six schools 25 to 30 percent of the students were reported absent from one or more classes. A typical student averaged two to four class absences per week, which adds up to over 100 classes missed in a 36-week school year—the equivalent of 18 full days.

Generally, class absences increased slightly as the school year progressed. If the approximately five percent of students who dropped out before the final term had stayed in school, this increase probably would have been higher, since most dropouts have higher than average absence rates. Class absences also varied over the course of the day; attendance was poorest in the first period of the day and immediately following lunch, although not dramatically so. More surprising, however, was the fact that absences were not higher in the last period classes—even during the end of the spring term, with its added inducements of warm, sunny afternoons.

Even more striking are the variations in class-period absences, a statistic usually overlooked in reports of total group averages. During the Spring 1984 term, for example, the average student missed 35 class periods. Nearly 600 students (9 percent) averaged less than one absence per course, but over 1,000 students (18 percent) averaged nine or more absences per course. Three hundred of those 1,000 students had more than 15 absences per course per term. Within every class period, approximately 12 percent of the students had perfect attendance, but nearly as many were absent about a third of the time. Many individual classes had an even greater variation over a nine-week term, with a fourth to a third of the students having no more than one absence and an equal number having over ten absences. When we examined this variability in class-period absences still further with a random sample of students, we discovered that nearly all were absent two or three times more often from their most frequently missed class than they were from their least missed class.

Many problems of incomplete attendance reporting could be avoided by measuring absences by class-period rather than by a full day or half day.

Absence: Which Classes?

We asked students which of their classes they cut most often, which classes they did not cut, and why. We also asked their reasons for skipping whole days, which were quite varied. Twenty percent simply said they cut whole days because they had "other things to do." "Illness," "personal problems," "homework," and "bored" each accounted for about 10 percent

of responses, while "party/drugs" or "hating school" were each mentioned by 5 percent. It is quite possible that these latter reasons would be more frequent among a sample limited to chronic truants.

The courses students said they cut most often were social science, English, and mathematics, followed closely by business. Each of these content areas was named on 20 to 25 percent of the 1,200 student returns we sampled in nearly the same order for all six high schools. Foreign language vied with the front runners in the schools with more college-bound students. Students' main reason for cutting a class was simply that it was "boring," a response that appeared on a third of the returns in every school. "Dislike of teacher" and "too easy" tied for second mention, each appearing on about 12 percent of the returns. Other reasons, such as "homework not done," "hate subject," and "too difficult," were also mentioned by small percentages of students.

Surprisingly, these same three content areas—social science, English, and mathematics—were also most frequently named as classes students "*wouldn't* cut" except that English, selected by approximately a third of the students in each school, moved to first place. Of course, students who listed these courses as ones they would never cut are not the same students who listed the courses as ones they cut most often. Nearly 40 percent said they did *not* cut these classes because they "would miss too much" or because the class was "interesting." "Good teacher" was mentioned on 7 percent of the returns, "learn a lot" on 2 percent. Generally, the traditional academic subjects, which are usually required courses, were mentioned more often than others perhaps because more students are enrolled in them. To some extent PE and science classes are also required courses, but both received fewer nominations.

Another interesting finding was that more juniors and seniors chose "too much [class] work to make up" as a reason for *not* cutting, while more freshmen and sophomores chose "parents or guardians would find out." No more than around 5 percent of the students at any grade level chose either of the other questionnaire alternatives: "teacher would find out" and "detention." This suggests that school penalties are only a minor deterrent to class cutting for many students. Nevertheless, we certainly do *not* propose doing away with penalties for absences (as did a third of the students in the survey), and we know of no data to support such a position.

Using teachers' records, we compared class absences by department. Our preliminary first-year data from reports of some 1,000 classes and over 200 teachers identified three subject areas—fine arts, science, and foreign language—as the classes with the lowest average absence rate (9.1 percent). Home economics, health, mathematics, and physical education all had the highest absence rate (12.0 percent). These differences, which amount to five more classes missed per school year, are not nearly so great as differences within departments, where some classes averaged three and four times as many student absences as others. There were many more absences in lower-level mathematics classes than in advanced classes, for instance.

We also computed the absence rate for each class a teacher had (typically five) and the average absence rate for all a teacher's classes combined. Again, we were struck by the variation both in the absence rates for different teachers and in absence rates of classes taught by the same teacher. Some teachers had average absences for all their classes that were double their school's average, while others had absences averaging a third less. We also found that neither a teacher's sex nor the class size nor the total number of students the teacher taught per day (whether 40 students or over 180) was related to students' absences. However, nearly all teachers recorded two, three, even five times more absences in some classes than in their best-attended classes.

School penalties are only a minor deterrent to class cutting for many students.

Unquestionably, students are selective about which classes they cut and how often; unquestionably too, teacher practices and course content enter in. Our continuing analysis during the second year of this project will include teacher reports on instruction methods, on their enforcement procedures, and on their beliefs about school policy. This data, we hope, will lead to more definitive answers about how teacher practice and beliefs relate to attendance.

Absence: Which Students?

We are especially interested in the students with the poorest attendance records. Accordingly, within each school and grade level we ranked students by their average class absences in order to compare the "best" and the "worst" student attendance records for each school. Upperclassmen would have been seriously underrepresented if grade level were not taken into account, since fewer seniors were found in either of the extreme groups. Another grade level difference was that about half again as many juniors and

seniors (37 percent) agreed with a statement that read, "I'm not bothered if I skip school some days." Fifty-six percent of seniors indicated that they were not bothered by cutting classes compared to 42 percent of freshmen. Over half of all students felt their school's attendance rules were *not* strictly enforced. At all grade levels, about one of every four students reported cutting class at least once a week.

Those with absences in the top fifth of the over 6,000 students in the sample missed an average of 12 periods in each of their classes compared to the middle fifth, which missed four periods, and the lower fifth, which missed one period. In each of the six high schools about as many girls as boys were in the high absence groups. In the larger of the two school districts, where there were more minority students, the low absence group contained disproportionately more students with Asian backgrounds and fewer black students.

In general, the questionnaire responses revealed more similarities than differences among the three groups. For example, we were surprised that nearly all students in all groups expected to graduate from high school. In addition, 82 percent of the high absence students and just above 90 percent of the other two groups reported that their high school learning had "a lot to do with what they would be able to do afterwards in life." Similar high proportions of students also said that they would *not* quit school if given the option.

Apparently, only a small portion of those students who are continually absent consciously intend to leave school altogether. Their continued absenteeism will almost certainly lead to failing grades in some courses or even to dropping out of school altogether, but this fact seems to be more a consequence than a choice. Other research indicates that poor school attendance in junior high school may be a strong predictor of dropping out. Another predictor is failing high school work. Most students who drop out appear to have a series of truancies and failing courses on record for their last term in school. The extent to which these students have been offered alternatives to continued school failures is not known.

Major differences between the high- and low-absence groups related to their feelings about skipping school or cutting classes. Nearly half of those in the high-absence group said that they did not feel unduly concerned about skipping "some days of school" (compared to only 19 percent of the low-absence group), and 62 percent (compared to 32 percent of the low-absence group) expressed *no* concern about cutting classes. Although the educational level of students' parents was nearly the same for both the low- and high-absence groups, fewer high-absence students took college prep courses or planned to go to a four-year college. There were further differences in expectations about grades: 20 percent fewer high-absence students found it easy to earn passing grades, and a large majority (85 percent) said that they would be satisfied with a C or D grade (compared to half of the students with fewer absences).

Apparently, only a small portion of those students who are continually absent consciously intend to leave school altogether.

Absences and Grades

One very clear discriminator between high-absence and low-absence students is the grade point average (GPA), which usually decreased as students' absences increased. Nearly half of all high-absence students had GPAs of 1.5 or lower, accounting for 84 percent of all GPAs below 1.5 in the six schools. This relationship was even more dramatic for students in the low-absence group: only 2 percent of low-absence students had GPAs as low as 1.5, whereas 70 percent had B averages (3.0) or better.

The relationship between attendance and grades was further revealed when we analyzed students' absences from the courses they were failing and found that their average absences in failed courses were more than *double* the school average. Moreover, students who were failing more than one course were absent from those classes over *three* times the school average. This substantial increase suggests a cascading effect on class absences implying that students enrolled in more than one class in which they are failing expect to fail. These findings are based on several thousand failed courses, with approximately one-fourth of the students receiving at least one F grade each term. We cannot dismiss these numbers easily. One implication here is that schools should not allow students who have poor attendance records to register for more than one difficult course per term. The pernicious effect of "double failure" should be avoided if we want our students to stay in school.

We looked at the possible effects of the midterm warnings given to students who are doing failing class work by comparing their class absences before the warning with those after the warning. In a sample of 161 "warned" students *who did fail,* two

out of three increased their typically high absence rate after the midterm warning. In the sample of 174 "warned" students who ultimately passed, nearly all had reduced their absence rate to near their school's average. It should also be noted that the students who passed *started* with generally lower absence rates at midterm than did those who failed. Nevertheless, although we would not suggest that improved attendance alone made the difference, it certainly is a frequent accompaniment to an improved grade.

Highlights of Major Findings

Problems in Measuring Attendance

- Records are neither accurate nor consistent from school to school.
- Reporting class absences gives a more complete picture of attendance than does reporting full-day or half-day absences.

Absence: How Much?

- Class absence rates are much higher than full-day or half-day rates (12.5 percent vs. 7.5 percent).
- Almost a third of students missed an average of at least one class per day (100 classes/year or 18 full days).
- Absences were highest for first period and the period following lunch.
- Nearly all students missed some of their classes two to three times more often than other classes.

Absence: Which Classes?

- Students named social sciences, English, and math as subjects they cut the most. Paradoxically, these subjects were also often cited as those other students would cut the least.
- Penalties seemed to be a poor deterrent.
- Having to make up classwork was the most powerful deterrent.

Absence: Which Students?

- In all grades, one in four students reported cutting at least one class per week.
- Most students with many absences still expected to graduate and felt school was valuable to their future.
- Fewer in the high absence group found it easy to pass courses.
- Eighty-five percent of the high absence group was satisfied with Cs or Ds.
- Dropping out appears to be a consequence, not a choice.

Absences and Grades

- GPA decreased as absences increased. Students with many absences accounted for 84 percent of low GPAs.
- Absences in failed classes were double the overall school rate and triple the school rate if students had more than one "failing class."

Teachers and Administrator Concerns

- Teachers and administrators were unanimous in seeing class cutting and tardiness as problems.
- Most teachers felt punctuality was important, but few assigned penalties for lateness.
- Many teachers and administrators felt that the other group did not support them in dealing with absentees.

Teacher and Administrator Concerns

Teachers and administrators in our six schools were nearly unanimous in considering class cutting and tardiness as problems in their schools. Over a fourth of the teachers reported that 20 percent or more of their students were absent on an average day; another third had about 10 percent absent. A third also reported that 10 percent or more of their students were generally tardy to class. Nearly every single teacher felt that attending class on time was important, but only a fourth of them said that they regularly assigned penalties for lateness. Over 80 percent said that it was a schoolwide problem, and only one in five saw the problem decreasing.

Our data revealed similar expressions of concern and complaint among all teachers and administrators. Most administrators and nearly half the teachers estimated that less than half of the students' reasons for being absent were legitimate. Indeed, 80 percent of both groups agreed that students "who work at it can get around penalties for class cutting and tardiness." Eighty-five percent of teachers and 60 percent of administrators also agreed that stronger penalties would reduce class cutting. Nearly all teachers saw themselves as enforcing attendance rules strictly but did not see all teachers this way. All administrators felt that they had reputations for "insisting that all students comply with school rules," yet many teachers said administrators were lenient. In fact, over half of the teachers were *dissatisfied* with the support administrators and counselors gave them in

dealing with absentees and complained about the lack of effective leadership. Interestingly, nearly half the administrators expressed similar dissatisfaction with "the support the school gets from teachers in handling class absence problems." Approximately three-fourths of the administrators agreed that if "all teachers would regularly enforce attendance rules, we would quickly see a reduction in absences."

Most teachers said they regularly reduced their students' grades for repeated unexcused absences, even when their district policy restricted such action. Ninety-one percent of the responding teachers and 80 percent of the administrators agreed that "no student who is frequently absent from class should be able to receive full credit or an A grade." The majority of teachers and nearly as many administrators also felt that their school was better off when chronically absent students simply dropped out or transferred to a new school. Although a majority of teachers reported that no more than half their students were "interested in the subjects I teach," paradoxically, nearly all teachers (94 percent) also said that they "enjoyed teaching in [their] school."

Summary

Generally, we found that class absences in high schools are widespread and frequent. In fact, the typical student misses over 100 classes during the school year. Students are also selectively absent, cutting classes they consider "boring" or "too easy" and not cutting classes they consider "interesting" or in which they would "miss too much." Unfortunately, our survey results suggest that students were not especially deterred by their schools' penalties for frequent absences. We found too that practically all teachers had classes with two to five times more absences than their best-attended classes. Our research results also show a very prominent relationship between class absences and grades. Students with many absences accounted for nearly all the low GPAs (below 1.5). Moreover, students tended to be absent more often from the classes they were failing than from their other classes. Effective classroom practices and school attendance policies, better attendance reporting and monitoring, improved school curriculum and instruction—these are the areas schools need to focus on in beginning their efforts to control chronic absenteeism and prevent more students from dropping out.

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